

Final curtain to come down on Henson's 34-year career

Laurie Williams Sowby
Arts/Entertainment Editor

■ An architect by design, Charles Henson found creativity and challenge on the stage.

PROVO — Charles Henson had something else in mind when he began classes in civil engineering at BYU.

But the need to support his young family sent his career in another direction when he took a job painting sets for an opera production. After his sophomore year — working as a scene painter for the speech and drama department — he switched his major to theater. And it's been a happily-ever-after story.

This year, Henson will retire after 34 years as a member of the BYU theater faculty, creating designs for a long list of diverse productions. His first — in the fall of 1958 — was a set on the lower campus's arena stage for *Blithe Spirit*, which had Charles Whitman and Carol Lynn Pearson as leads. He has created sets for the same show numerous times since then as it has been restaged at BYU and even overseas in the early 1960s.

Recent audiences will recall his outdoor Appalachian set for *Foxfire* and the interior of a two-story house for Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound*, both staged in the Pardoe Theatre. His set for *Pygmalion*, running through June 13, is his last for BYU. He has also done his share of scenic designs for Shakespeare productions.

Regardless of the play, the design begins with several readings of the script and much study and research. If the play is historical, "I immerse myself in the architecture of the period," Henson says, adding, "I spend a lot of time at the library."

Still, "it's hard to say where an idea comes from." When BYU was getting ready to stage *The Lark* (the story of St. Joan) in the 1960s, he



STAGE RIGHT: Scenic designer Charles Henson stands on the set of "Pygmalion," his final design for the BYU theater department.

remembers, "I couldn't get an idea to come." But as he perused books and drawings of the period, he noticed an arch in a cathedral. He built his idea on that architectural line.

Getting it right is important to Henson: "I'm trying to create an environment to house the intent of the director." Even though each drama piece has a setting indicated by the playwright, he notes, each director puts his or her own interpretation on it. With the set, the designer is trying to convey to the audience what kind of people inhabit the place and what to expect, whether it be comedy, tragedy, or serious drama, he adds.

Henson recalls a couple of plays where his set design just didn't work for the director and had to be redesigned in a short time. Such was the

circumstance for a production of *The Coat of Many Colors*. The director phoned after a rehearsal, and Henson came back with a new concept an hour-and-a-half later. "It was the first time we'd used a turntable on a raked (sloped) stage."

As much as he'd like to create the perfect set design, it's almost an impossibility. "In each set," he explains, "there is something that, as the curtain opens on opening night, you think, 'Oh, gee. If I'd only done this or that, it would have been better.'"

Still, the creative process remains a thrill for Henson. Comparing scenic design to architecture, Henson tells of a classmate who does have a career as an architect. "He tells me he's just done a school — a pretty straight-forward design," Henson

says, "and I tell him I just finished designing a Gothic cathedral castle for Hamlet. There's an end variety of locations. You never know from one project to the next what it's going to be, and I find it most challenging and fulfilling."

There's an element of excitement in the unknown as Henson looks forward to retirement this summer, though he put in a four-year stint as Provo city councilman. "I've never quite been able to get away from government." He's still managing the Metropolitan Water District plans to spend more time with four grandchildren and serve LDS mission with his wife.

With the location and scenery yet unknown, his next project is to be a welcome challenge for Charles Henson.